

Ecclesiastes 2:12–17 | “What’s the Point?!”  
*Preached on March 22, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Turn in your Bibles this morning to Ecclesiastes 2, verse 12. *[pausee]*

Working through Ecclesiastes in the past few weeks, we have seen that the author’s goal is to find what makes living worthwhile. *[pause]*

Like, what are we to do in this life that will last beyond time, death, and circumstance?

What are we to pursue above all as our ultimate aim? *[pauseee]*

We saw that our human effort can’t break us free from how the world is. *[pause]*

We saw that human wisdom couldn’t be relied upon to provide us with the answers to the biggest questions. *[pause]*

Then we saw that life can’t be all about the pleasures of this world, for they do not provide lasting satisfaction or fulfillment.

And now, the author goes back to wisdom once again. *[pause]*

He examines wisdom more closely by comparing it with folly to see whether wisdom provides any lasting advantage. *[pause]*

Let’s READ the passage. *[READ 12–17]*

In this passage, Solomon compares wisdom with folly. *[pause]*

A clear illustration of wisdom and folly is seen in “an experiment [that] was conducted in which six bees and six flies were placed inside a bottle. *[pause]*

The bottle was turned on its side with its base facing the light coming through the window.

*[And] at the other end, the mouth of the bottle was open. [pause]*

In that situation it was discovered that bees will persist in trying [to] find their way to freedom through the base until they die of hunger or exhaustion.

The light shining through the base seems to convince them that there is no other way out. *[pausee]*

The feather brained flies, on the other hand, all get out of the bottle within two minutes. *[pause]*

Seemingly unconcerned, they just keep buzzing all around inside until they sally forth to freedom through the neck and out the opening.”<sup>1</sup> *[pausee]*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/folly>.

In that experiment, the bees were stubbornly foolish, and it led them to die in an open bottle.  
[pause]

The flies were wise in that they were open to correction, and so kept looking for an opening.  
[pauseee]

Wisdom and folly—both are present in our world, but one is definitely better than the other.

*That's something that Solomon points out in verses 12–14...*

### **I. Human wisdom is of some value. (12–14)**

In verse 12, we are told that the author “turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly.”  
[pause]

This is what the author keeps doing with so many different things—he dwells upon them deeply.

He thinks carefully about these topics, not being satisfied with superficial answers. [pauseeee]

I find that there are so many people who do not think deeply about things.

It's like they are snagged in their routines, stuck in the shallow end, and so satisfied with only scraping the surface. [pause]

Ask them why they are doing something, and they simply say, “That's just what I always do.”  
[pause]

Pry into the big questions of life, and it's almost like they've never thought about them.

But that's not to be us, rather, we are to be people, who know that we have God-given brains and wisdom—let's use them! [pause]

Christians should be deep thinkers like Solomon, who really contemplated things. [pauseeee]

Here Solomon ponders wisdom and folly, and if anyone could evaluate those things, it is Solomon.

He was the wisest man, and so he says, “What can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.” [pause]

Solomon acquired everything and had so much wisdom, so who could trump him?

If he looked deeply into wisdom, do you think that you'll see deeper still? [pauseee]

You can only do what he already did, *if that*, so let's listen to what the Preacher says about wisdom. [pauseeee]

What's one of his insights?...

Well look at verse 13, “Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly.” *[pause]*

He’s telling us that wisdom is definitely better than folly.

He would never say otherwise, for this is the man of great wisdom, the author of so many proverbs. *[pause]*

He knows for sure that it is better than folly, and deep down, we all know this, too. *[pauseeee]*

No one would intentionally go out and say, “I’m going to do as many foolish things as possible today because my day will go better!”

No way—you know deep down that making wise choices will make your day go better than making a string of foolish decisions. *[pauseee]*

There’s more gain in wisdom than folly. *[pause]*

He illustrates this by comparing it with light and darkness, and so it’s like wisdom and folly are like day and night! *[pauseeee]*

Think of the benefits of light compared to darkness...

When you are trying to get somewhere in the dark, don’t you look for some sort of light? *[pause]*

Of course, it’s because you need light to see.

So you flip on a light, use your phone light, get a flashlight, or something—anything, to be able to see. *[pause]*

Darkness may help you sleep, but light helps you to function. *[pauseee]*

With light, you know where you are going.

With light, you can see the dangers around you.

With light, you are guided and directed—light provides more “gain” than darkness. *[pauseeeee]*

He then combines the wise-foolish and light-darkness imagery in verse 14: “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” *[pause]*

So the wise person is like a person with light to see, but a fool is like a person in complete darkness.

No wonder the fool makes horrible choices, and gets himself into trouble, it’s because it’s like he’s living in darkness! *[pause]*

This shows us the importance of wisdom: it helps you to live well, but if you neglect wisdom, your life will be a continual streak of stumbles. *[pauseeeee]*

So many people are living as fools, and wonder why their life is a wreck, and it's because it's like you are walking about in the dark! *[pause]*

Turn to the light of wisdom, and see how it can help you avoid the pitfalls of folly. *[pauseeee]*

You see, wise Solomon has said a lot about the limits of wisdom, but he doesn't want us to throw wisdom out with the bathwater.

He wants to be clear: *wisdom does have value*—it's like choosing light over darkness, so definitely seek to live wisely. *[pauseeee]*

Do you see that wisdom is better than folly? *[pause]*

Here's another question to really evaluate yourself: do you *live* as though wisdom is better than folly? *[pause]*

Is it seen in what you value? *[pause]*

Is it seen in your choices? *[pause]*

Is your life characterized by wisdom or foolishness? *[pauseeee]*

So Solomon concludes that wisdom is better than folly, but he doesn't stop there.

He goes farther, drills deeper, and pushes wisdom to its limits to see if it will hold the weight of a soul. *[pauseee]*

He 'saw' that wisdom helps you in this life in that it makes your life typically go better, but he's not satisfied with shallow, short-sightedness.

He wants to look further, for he wants to know if wisdom can stand the test of death. *[pauseeee]*

*After evaluating it, he tells us in verses 15–17 that...*

## **II. Human wisdom cannot defeat death. (15–17)**

Have you ever stress-tested something? *[pause]*

This is when you apply pressure to something to see if and when it will break. *[pause]*

If it doesn't break at first, you apply more pressure and more, until it eventually gives out.

Well Solomon stress-tested human wisdom and it broke when the pressure of death was applied to it. *[pauseeee]*

After telling us that wisdom is better than folly, he says at the end of verse 14 into 15, "And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them..."

Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.” [pauseeee]

Have you ever said to yourself, “What’s the point?!” [pause]

We say this when we feel like the things that we do don’t provide us with what we were hoping for. [pause]

Let’s say that you were super conscious about not picking up any sicknesses at the places you went to because you had a very important appointment coming up. [pause]

But what happens? Somehow you *still* get sick, and you’re thinking, “What was the point?!”

All of that effort did no good. [pause]

So also, the death of both wise and foolish people led Solomon to say, “What’s the point?!” [pauseeee]

Yes, wisdom has benefits for this earthly life, but he also looked ahead and saw that both wise and foolish people die.

They were leveled by the grave. [pauseeee]

Human wisdom may prevent an *earlier* death, but it does not prevent an *eventual* death. [pauseee]

Wisdom is like a leaking umbrella: it’s better than no umbrella, yet it does not keep you fully dry from the drops of death. [pauseeee]

This means that no one can say, “I won’t ever die physically because I was so wise!”

Human wisdom doesn’t have that power when face-to-face with the end. [pauseeee]

Though they wouldn’t express it, many people live this way.

They think that if only they are wise with their health, working out like crazy, staying away from certain unhealthy foods or materials, and eating right, then they will live on. [pauseee]

Bryan Johnson, a tech mogul, is a clear illustration of this...

Johnson believes that he has figured out the basics of immortality, spending millions of dollars to do so. [pause]

His thinking is that through scientific experiments and facts he can discover the way to live forever. [pause]

He even wants to be the best in history at not dying, and proudly wears a shirt that says on the front, “Don’t die.” [pauseee]

In a podcast interview, he was asked, “Do you believe that there’s a possibility that you won’t die?”

And he responded by saying, “Yes. Unquestionably.”<sup>2</sup> *[pauseeee]*

Solomon would say in response to that, “The same event happens to all of us.” *[pause]*

No amount of technology, wisdom, or knowledge will save you from death, for death is the great equalizer.

And this means that your ultimate hope cannot be placed in man’s wisdom, for it cannot save you. *[pause]*

It may light a path, it may guide you from certain dangers, it may be helpful in many regards, but it cannot save you from death. *[pauseeee]*

This should humble us, reminding us that knowledge and intelligence are not the fountain of youth, securing for us eternal life, if only we would drink from them. *[pause]*

As commentator Micheal Eaton put it, “As a cure for the ultimate problem of life, wisdom is useless.”<sup>3</sup> *[pauseeee]*

Listen up: earthly wisdom cannot be your ultimate reliance, for death will eventually meet you head on, and human wisdom will be eaten away before its all-consuming teeth. *[pauseeee]*

Lasting significance and meaning, therefore, cannot be placed in the amount of wisdom and knowledge you have.

They may be beneficial in this earthly life, but they disintegrate before death’s glare. *[pauseeee]*

This is why the author goes on to say in verse 16...

“For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!” *[pauseeee]*

Not only is death the great equalizer, but time is the great eraser. *[pauseeee]*

Wise people and intellectuals think that they will be remembered, but most of the time, they aren’t. *[pause]*

An illustration of someone thinking that they are great, and so will be remembered as great forever is found in this picture. *[SHOW SLIDE]*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roHeUk7ApUo>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 82.

These huge statues were put there by Pharaoh Amenhotep III, and stand at an astonishing 60 feet.  
[pause]

Look at them, though: they are deteriorating and his full “significance” is long forgotten. [pause]

Interestingly, these statues were placed there in order to guard the entrance to his mortuary temple, which is now long gone.<sup>4</sup> [pause]

We may remember that that specific Pharaoh was a Pharaoh, but to us it’s just another historical site that’s neat to look at, and we move on.

99.99% of people aren’t even remembered that much. [pause]

What can the writer of Ecclesiastes say to all of this?

How does he respond to the fact that human wisdom cannot save you from death, and that even super wise people are long forgotten someday? [pause]

He can’t help but conclude in verse 17, “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.” [pause]

As he thinks about this, it leads him to a feeling of hatred for life.

It’s like nothing is providing the key to lasting gain beyond death, and it leaves him distressed and troubled. [pause]

If human wisdom isn’t the solution to enduring satisfaction and fulfillment, then what is?!  
[pause]

He thinks about a person who pursues and lives by wisdom all of their life, only to die just like their foolish neighbor, and he says, “Vanity!” [pause]

This shows us that living with human wisdom as your *ultimate* aim is actually a foolish endeavor. [pause]

Yes, you may have that drive to be smarter, smarter, and smarter, but death meets you—now what? [pause]

Life can’t be all about another degree strapped under your belt, it can’t be about merely avoiding all the unhealthy things, thinking that that will save you in the long run...

It must be lived for something else. [pause]

*Ecclesiastes teaches us here that...*

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<sup>4</sup> Edward M. Curtis, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, *Teach the Text Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 10.

## Human wisdom cannot save you!

I want you to think of two unbelievers. *[pausee]*

One lived his life foolishly, and this led him to stumble a lot.

He stubbornly dropped out of school, and it ruined his future, as he found it hard to get a good paying job for the rest of his life. *[pause]*

He also foolishly got himself into drugs, and so got put into jail for a bit. *[pause]*

Eventually he got out, and yet made many more foolish decisions through the years that pushed his family to not want to be around him anymore. *[pause]*

His life wasn't very smooth at all due to his folly, and eventually he died at age 70. *[pauseee]*

Now let's turn our attention to the other guy...

He lived a pretty wise life. *[pause]*

He finished high school and college, and made sure to stay out of trouble. *[pause]*

This wisdom led him to have a good, solid career, so that he could put away money and make it so that his family was well-off. *[pause]*

His wisdom led him to choose a good wife, and they raised 2 kids together. *[pause]*

He also wisely took care of his health by working out a lot, so that he didn't have any major health issues. *[pause]*

Due to his wisdom, his life went smoother than the other man's, but eventually, he too, died at the age of 70. *[pauseeee]*

Now looking at those two men, what can we deduce? *[pause]*

Living by wisdom is definitely better than living foolishly, for just compare the lives of each man—it's like night and day. *[pause]*

But when all is said and done, they both die in the end and face God's judgment for their sin. *[pauseeee]*

The wise man's wisdom didn't produce any *lasting gain*.

So what ultimate good was it in the grand scheme of things for that man to be wise and to trust that wisdom? *[pause]*

It helped him in this earthly life, but it didn't help him when it came to death and what comes after.

So we need *more* than human wisdom, knowledge, and intelligence. *[pause]*

We need more than some wise choices that make life a little better here on earth, for they cannot deal with the ultimate problems of sin and death. *[pauseeee]*

Human wisdom cannot bear the weight of a soul when death comes along, so what we need is something outside of ourselves! *[pauseeee]*

This passage stirs us to look outward and upward to God and His wisdom.

We ultimately need the wisdom from above, not the wisdom found ‘under the sun’! *[pause]*

The wisdom of this world may make life go a little better, but the wisdom of God leads us to life that goes beyond death. *[pauseeee]*

What we need is what Paul calls “the sacred writings, which are able to make you *wise for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

In Him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> *[pause]*

It’s only through Jesus Christ that we can be saved, and so experience life that continues beyond earthly death.

And we can receive this when we recognize our need, repent of our sin, and then reach out in faith to Jesus, who came and died for us on the Cross. *[pauseee]*

This means that even though we may not be “wise according to worldly standards,”<sup>7</sup> we can be saved through Jesus, the power and wisdom of God.<sup>8</sup> *[pauseeee]*

You see, the same event may happen to us all, but we don’t have the same destination, and it’s only because of the grace of Jesus Christ. *[pause]*

We can’t save ourselves, but we can only trust in what has already been done by Christ!

So we turn to the wisdom of God, not the wisdom of man. *[pauseee]*

There is truly and immeasurably and eternally more gain in the wisdom of God than in anything else, for it’s through His wisdom that He provided Christ, who was crucified for our sin.

And now we have “the light of life”!<sup>9</sup> *[pauseee]*

In Him, our lives are no longer vain, but infinitely meaningful and eternally lasting.<sup>10</sup> *[pause]*

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15 (italics is mine).

<sup>6</sup> Colossians 2:3.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26.

<sup>8</sup> A reference to 1 Corinthians 1:24.

<sup>9</sup> John 8:12.

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:14.

We no longer have to hate life, but can have “life and have it abundantly.”

So yes, we who have been made “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”<sup>11</sup> may physically die just like the fool, but that’s not the end of our story.

Instead, because of God’s grace, our lives continue on forever with Him. *[pauseee]*

Human wisdom cannot save you, but the good news is that God’s wisdom, displayed in the cross of Christ, *can*.

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15.